Pay Per Click: What's This All About?

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A recent article on the Associated Press site indicated that several of the world's most prominent technology companies are offering suggestions to newspaper publishers on how they can charge readers for news online. Four of the largest technology companies IBM Corporation, Microsoft Corporation, Oracle Corporation and Google Inc. responded to a request by the Newspaper Association of America for proposals on ways to easily charge for news on the Web.

With their advertising dollars in a steady decline, newspaper publishers over the last couple of months have been seriously debating whether to discontinue offering free online access to some of the content they run in their print editions.

While some publishers are still very reluctant to put their toe in the water, other large newspaper organizations are prepared to implement Internet toll booths for specific niche content areas on their sites within the next couple of months.

A recent study by the American Press Institute found 58% of the responding newspapers are considering online fees. Of that group, 22% expect to introduce the fee before the end of the year. Although it has been reported that more than 1,000 newspapers and magazines have signed nonbinding letters of intent to join an Internet fee system being assembled by Journalism Online LLC, very few have taken the plunge. Most have adopted the "wait and see" attitude.

Personally, I can't blame them for being reticent. Predicting how much, if anything, readers will be willing to pay for online content that has been given away in the past is a daunting task. However, running totally free sites hasn't been profitable for most newspapers either, or magazines for that matter.

Here's the irony in all of this Information is key to successful decision making whether you are a CEO of a major corporation or running a country. It seems as though the wide-scale access to current as well as archived news at no cost has left us a bit jaded and the value of online content has steadily declined, and that needs to change.

If newspaper publishers are going to start down this path, they need to take baby steps and do it incrementally. They will also need to have a payment system that is

both efficient and easy to use (that's where you guys come in.) Readers are not going to want to repeatedly provide their credit card numbers and personal information each time they wish to download content. And it will need to be content that is very specific and not easily available from multiple sources. It will need to serve a certain niche, e.g., coverage and commentary on sports, entertainment or politics that is not available in its print or free online edition.

I strongly support open and free access to most online content, but would also be willing to pay a nominal fee for exclusive items only available from one source. If such fees will help preserve the value of print content for years to come, I say go for it.

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